

INTRODUCTION:

Imagine this: You're having a picnic with your family at Daisy Hill State Forest. Everything's fine - the weather, the food, the family. Everyone's enjoying themselves. Suddenly, a long bearded man wearing a hairy coat and chewing on some grasshoppers, comes toward you and yells, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near!" What would you do? Would you listen to him or run from him, thinking he's a crazy?

I want to speak to you this morning a message entitled: "A Man Sent From God". We will take a detailed look at a man called 'John, the Baptist', and I find the basis for this in the gospel according to John, chapter 1.

BODY:

More than five hundred years ago, in the little village of Ferrara, Italy, a baby boy was born into a noble family. His parents named him Girolamo Savonarola. Little did they realise that their baby would grow up to be a man sent from God. From his earliest years, this keen, intelligent boy possessed an invincible love for God. By his own testimony, he was prepared to abandon life itself for the glory of Christ. His life was a mixture of loneliness and ruggedness. He deprived himself of every indulgence. Instead of the 'leather sofas', he chose the hardest couch. Instead of 'micro-fibre suits', he wore plain garments. Instead of 'meals at the Hilton', he ate only the basic foods.

He lived in a time characterised by widespread corruption and wickedness in the church. The offices of bishop and cardinal were put up for auction and sold to the highest bidder. Immorality in its grossest forms was prevalent in monasteries and convents; even in the local congregations it was displayed without shame. The church had become a den of vice and iniquity.

This so burdened this young priest that he spoke out, with fiery eloquence, against these practices. He preached in Florence, Italy, for eight years pleading for purity of life and simplicity of worship. However, he was resented by the clergy and publicly assaulted by the officials of the church. He didn't fit in with the rest of them. 10 - 12,000 people would flock to hear what he would say; in fact, he caused what was called 'a bonfire of vanities', where people would bring all their trinkets, obscene material and pagan items to be burnt in the town square. That was the last straw for the church leaders.

Intruding in on one of his devotion times, they broke into his monastery, dragged him into the streets, and locked him away in a loathsome dungeon. There he was tortured for weeks.

Finally, the day of his trial came. The church leaders were so determined to destroy him that one of the pope's commissioners wrote: "Put Savonarola to death, even if he were another John the Baptist."

In a fit of unjust rage, one said to him, "Savonarola, I separate you from the church militant, and the church triumphant." Savonarola replied, "From the church militant, yes, but you cannot separate me from the church triumphant." They then hanged him, set fire to his remains, and threw his ashes into the river Arno.

Those of you who know your church history, will know the importance Savonarola had on the Reformation. In him we find a perfect parallel to John the Baptist. Savonarola was a man sent from God to Italy, John the Baptist was a man sent from God to Israel. Both lived

modestly and preached mightily. And both were forerunners, paving a highway for their Lord in a moral wilderness; Savonarola for the Reformation; John the Baptist for the kingdom of God.

Now, a lot of us have a vague view of who John the Baptist really was. Sure you could tell me what he did, but could you tell me what he was like as a person.

1. BACKGROUND OF THE MAN SENT

Let me give you some background on John the Baptist. His parents were Zacharias and Elizabeth, both elderly people whom God graciously surprised with a baby. Dr. Luke informs us in his gospel that, from his boyhood until the day of his public ministry, John lived in the deserts. He had a real desert upbringing. Not just living on the outer-edge of suburbia, but in a real wilderness. We're told that he ate a steady diet of locusts and wild honey, probably because he couldn't find anything else. Ill bet he was right at Sizzler's whenever a swarm of locusts hit town.

In the cold solitude of the desert, where he was all alone, he got his message from God. It was in the wilderness that God was able to fill him with Himself. John was totally devoted to God in everything - and Savonarola was just like him.

Matthew records John's first sermon as, "You brood of vipers!" Now let me tell you something, you don't make too many friends when you preach like that. This is not the type of advice Dale Carnegie gives in his book, 'How to win friends and influence people'. But he was saying this to the misleading religious leaders of the day. His fire-and-brimstone message was a call to repentance in order to prepare the way for Jesus.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MAN SENT

Okay, so let's take a closer look at John and we will see the characteristics of a man of God.

A. HE WAS HUMAN, BUT NOT ORDINARY.

John 1:6 introduces this extraordinary man. John was no angel, no spark of divinity - just a man. There was nothing significant about his name, unlike the names Immanuel and Jesus that are loaded with meaning. He was just John in a plain brown wrapper ... but he was not ordinary. Although he had the most common of names, he himself was the most uncommon of men. When I say 'not ordinary', I mean it in the sense of 'not mediocre or average'. It says that he was "sent by God," commissioned by the Almighty.

He stood virtually alone and didn't fit into any preformed mould. He was neither Pharisee nor Sadducee nor priest nor Levite nor scribe. He didn't sound like a preacher .. and he didn't smell like a saint! He was human, but he wasn't ordinary. The first characteristic of a man or woman of God is that they are not just like everyone else, they are not just 'one of the boys'. They've been set apart with God's call on their lives to be different from this world.

B. HE WAS A LAMP, BUT NOT THE LIGHT.

Verse 7 tells us precisely why John came. John came as a witness with one goal in mind: to turn people around so they could see the light. How simple. How true.

How often do people, when they get together, want to talk about themselves rather than others in a good sense? Almost always. People want to brag about their achievements, their success, their intelligence and their plans. What we need are not more people who will talk about themselves, but more who will rather talk, testify, or be witness about someone else - namely Christ.

John's office was not embellished with pomp and ceremony; he was no religious dignitary or published theologian. He was simply a beggar telling other beggars where to find bread, as verse 8 indicates.

John was a lamp, but not the light; he was a wick, but not the flame. The "true light" that enlightens every man was Jesus (verse 9). John had no problem with this - he knew that he wasn't the light and he never claimed to be so. He saw himself in the shadow of the Saviour (verse 15). Last week we established the eternity of Christ, his deity. John understood this and pointed all to the greatness of Jesus.

He was a lamp, but not the light. Here's an interesting thought. Most of us have had a variety of lamps in our homes over the years: desk lamps, bankers lamps, chandeliers. Some have probably been fancy, fashioned in brass or silver or glass, etc. Some may have been very common, like a simple porcelain fixture. Whatever, the important thing is the light, not the lamp. It's the glow in the bulb that lights up a room, not the shine on the brass. Are you exhibiting Christ in your life as the true Light of the World, or is the ornamentation of your lamp the main thing people see? Is His light radiating through your life, or is it being obstructed by a cumbersome lampshade of sin?

C. HE WAS A VOICE, BUT NOT THE WORD.

Some people can be a real puzzle or a strange enigma, and we try to work them out mentally. To the religious people in Jerusalem, John was a puzzle for them. So they sent out some people to him. They said, "There's a crazy guy out there at Bethany, poppin' locusts and dressed like a hippie. He's definitely a loony but our temples are emptying out and the people are goin' to him! Find out who he is!"

Verses 19-23 John replies, "I'm nothing but a voice." Like the relationship between a singer's voice and the song's lyrics, John was simply a voice, while Jesus was the Word of God.

What did it mean to make straight the way for the Lord? The quote is from Isaiah 40 and the imagery was taken from the days when there were no paved roads, only tracks across the fields. If a king were to travel, the road must be built and smoothed out that the royal chariot might not find the travelling too rough or muddy. Not only that, with a way made straight, people could get a real view of the king. In the same way, John paved the path for the Messiah.

What's a voice? A voice is nothing more than a vehicle. When someone speaks, they may stop, but what they say will remain. The voice can stop but the word lingers. Our sights are very short if we are attracted to a voice or a lamp rather than the Word of God.

D. HE WAS USEFUL, BUT NOT INDISPENSABLE.

Verses 25-28 John's humility really comes out in verse 27, and even sharper focus when we understand that slaves would untie their master's sandals. John was willing to stoop to the lowest level of servility in deference to the Messiah.

Whether you minister to a lot of people or only to a handful, you are useful to God. But you are not indispensable - you can be replaced. Therefore, your ministry must be marked by humility. Someone once said, "man is most useful if he attaches his listener's affection to Christ, and not to himself"

The same goes for the pulpit - it doesn't revolve around the preacher, but Jesus. John, though he was fruitful, refused to be idolised. Samuel Chadwick, an old Methodist preacher, said, "If successful, don't crow. If a failure, don't croak" I want you to appreciate this in John - he never crowed. He never considered himself indispensable. Do you? Do you realise that while you are useful to the Lord, if your ministry is not marked by humility, you can always be replaced? We are all indispensable.

You know, man is a strange creature indeed - the only one I know when you pat him on the back, he swells in the head. He can hardly handle it. He also has ingrown eyeballs! But not that we go to the extreme where we don't encourage one another. Remember Mohammed Ali? He always stated, "I'm the greatest. I told you and I'll tell you again. I'm also the prettiest." Now look where he is.

E. HE WAS A WITNESS, BUT NOT AN OBJECT OF WORSHIP.

I just love verse 29-34, where John says, "Aah look, my competition!" No, of course he doesn't say that. He was never threatened of competition, but pushed the focus upon the Lord. But does competition threaten you? Are you agitated when others come into the lime-light. John's whole ministry was to make manifest the Christ. He didn't want to receive any glory; he wanted to give it to Christ.

In John 3:30 we see the philosophy that John lived by. Does this mean that he had a useless ministry? No. He had a balanced ministry. The voice made ready the way of the Word. The confronter of sins heralded the One who takes all sin away. The man sent from God bowed to the man who was God. The forerunner revealed the One he was running before. The water-baptiser pointed to the Spirit-baptiser. And finally, this priest's son testified that Jesus was indeed the very Son of God. In all this, we see that John was a witness of all this, but never an object of worship.

3. MARKS OF GOD-SENT PEOPLE TODAY

Here are the characteristics of John, the man sent from God.

- He was human, but not ordinary.
- He was a lamp, but not the Light.
- He was a voice, but not the Word.
- He was useful, but not indispensable.
- He was a witness, but not an object of worship.

In short, the true qualities of people sent by God are that they exalt the One who sent them, and they diminish the one who is sent. Those truly sent from God are terribly uncomfortable when honoured and flattered.

Elizabeth Klephane wrote a hymn ending with these lines:

I take, O cross, thy shadow from my abiding place;
I ask no other sunshine, than the sunshine of His face;
Content to let the world go by, content to know no gain no loss;
My sinful self, my only shame; my glory, all the cross.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, let me relate an incredible experience Savonarola had when he went from Genoa to Florence. Believing that God had sent him to minister to the corrupt San Marco monastery, Savonarola journeyed there, only to collapse with fatigue at the base of the mountain range that led to the monastery.

Despairing of life, Savonarola was visited by a stranger. Its unknown whether the stranger was real or a vision or an angel. But the story has it that the visitor fed the discouraged traveller, gave him rest, and encouraged him.

The stranger helped Savonarola reach the gate of the monastery. Once there, the stranger is reported to have said, "And now, Savonarola, remember to do that for which God has sent thee"; then he left. At that, Savonarola then ran through the gate.

Being a voice in a moral wilderness can be a lonely and discouraging experience. It's easy for fatigue and despair to set in. But many of you have felt the call to be that voice - like Savonarola; like John the Baptist - in your family, at your school, where you work. If that's the case, and you're feeling faint and discouraged, feeling you can't go on, then I want to be that stranger and encourage you to get up and "remember to do that for which God has sent thee."

There are particular perils that the devil sets up for us: pride, egotism, envy, jealousy, competition, the drive for popularity, assumed infallibility, illusions of indispensability, and so on. We all wrestle with it. That beast within your breast today longs to be exalted. But that's why the Holy Spirit has been given - so He can have full control to exalt Christ through us. One once prayed like this, "Reduce us and crush us, Lord, so we can point to the Saviour better." Amen. ^s of righteousness by works.